

IN THE UNITED STATES PATENT
AND TRADEMARK OFFICE

APPLICATION FOR
UNITED STATES UTILITY PATENT

IMPROVEMENTS TO BUSINESS SYSTEM

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IMPROVEMENTS TO BUSINESS SYSTEM

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field Of The Invention

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This invention relates to improvements to business systems with which a customer can be in direct electronic communication with a vendor, e.g., via a system such as the Internet global communications system. In certain aspects, this invention relates to such systems that also provide guaranteed pricing for a predetermined time period so that a consumer is assured that an item purchased will not be sold in the near future at a discount or sale price which is not made available to the consumer.

Description of Related Art

Filed on even date herewith is the application entitled "Business System" naming Sunil Thakur and Zulfiqar Momin as inventors. This application is incorporated fully herein for all purposes including its discussion of Related Art.

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There has long been a need, recognized by the present inventor, for a system that provides to a consumer the assurance that the consumer will not buy an item or service and then find out in the near future that the item or service was made available at a much lower price. There has long been a need for such a system usable with Internet business systems and network systems.

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SUMMARY OF THE PRESENT INVENTION

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The present invention, in certain aspects, provides a system that, in certain aspects, includes any of the systems and/or methods disclosed in the previously-mentioned "Business System" patent application, additionally with the following: a method in which a vendor who sells a business or service to a consumer

maintains a record of the sale and monitors that item (or service) for a preset time period (e.g., but not limited to, for a week, a month, three months, six months, or a year). If the item is offered at a lower price than the consumer paid, or for sale within the preset time period with any additional new incentive and/or at a lower cost than that paid by the consumer, the consumer is automatically given a refund, a credit, and/or a coupon or certificate good for use equal to the difference in sales prices and/or including value for the new incentive. Alternatively, the vendor may make available a refund, etc. of lesser or of more value than the price difference. Alternatively, a host system or any centralized system as disclosed in the "Business System" patent application (or in any prior art system cited therein) may record the sale, monitor the vendor and the product (or service) for the preset time period, and handle the making available of the refund, etc. to the consumer.

In other embodiments, the vendor (and/or host system or other system) monitors all vendors of such an item; monitors all vendors of such an item in a pertinent geographic area as defined in the "Business System" patent application; and/or monitors all providers of the item as identified by the manufacturer thereof. In certain aspects, the consumer is alerted to the fact that a refund is available or that a refund has been made by phone, by fax; and/or by email. In one embodiment, a consumer using a host system or similar system is automatically notified of such a refund, etc. upon logging on to the host system, e.g., but not limited to by a blinking icon or message such as "You've Got Refund\$." In one aspect, when a consumer has an account with the vendor (or an account with the host system or similar system), the account is automatically credited with the refund amount. Such a blinking icon and/or message may also be used with the methods of the "Business System" patent application to alert a consumer to: a retirement account contribution (e.g. but not limited to "You've Got IRA\$"; "You've Got Retirement \$"; or simply "Retirement \$"); an

available coupon (e.g. but not limited to "You've Got Coupons";
"You've Got Coupon \$"; or simply "Coupons" or "Coupon \$"); future
rewards or future "bucks" (e.g. but not limited to "You've Got
Future rewards;" "You've Got Futurereward\$"; "You've Got
5 Futurebucks;" "You've Got Futurebuck\$"; "Futurerewards";
"Futurereward\$"; "Futurebucks"; "Futurebuck\$"; "You've Got
Discounts"; "You've Got Discount\$"; "Discounts" or "Discount\$".

In certain embodiments a price guaranteeing system according
to the present invention can also monitor the vendor's competitors
10 and guarantee to a consumer that if any competitor offers a lower
price (and/or new incentive), the consumer will get the benefit of
the competitor's lower price. In one aspect, the vendor (and/or
host system or similar system) monitors competitors on a real time
basis and provides the consumer at the vendor's location any better
price available then at any competitor for the same item (or
service). In one aspect such a method includes making available
presenting to the consumer any coupon, rebate, incentive etc.
offered by a competitor. Such "incentive matching" can be limited,
in certain embodiments, to a pertinent geographic area.

Any method and system according to the present invention may
also be in communication with and part of any airline's frequent
flyer mile program so that sales and refunds, etc. qualify for
miles. To alert a consumer that miles have been earned related to
a transaction, a blinking icon or message as described above may be
25 used, e.g., but not limited to "Miles"; "You've Got Miles"; and
"Mile\$".

In one aspect a host system or similar system (e.g. but not
limited to as in the "Business System" patent application and any
prior art system disclosed therein) maintains a listing of vendor's
30 that subscribe to and use the host system (or other system). When
a consumer is afforded a refund, etc. based on a competitor's
offerings, the host system can contact the competitor informing it
that the competitor's offering was used as a refund basis and
making available to the competitor a subscription for the host

system.

In another aspect, whenever a consumer uses the host system or other system for any inquiry and/or transaction, the host system can contact any non-subscribing vendor that offers such a product or service and alert them to the fact that a sale was missed, then offer the non-subscribing vendor a subscription or sign-up agreement.

In other embodiments any system and method described herein may include the following (or any Internet system may use the following): when a consumer makes a purchase via the system, warranty information and/or warranty sign-up processing may be made available to the consumer by phone, by fax, by email, and/or via an interactive Internet site. A blinking icon or message as discussed above may be used to alert a consumer regarding warranties, e.g., but not limited to "Warranty !"; "Warranties"; "Warranty\$"; "You've Got Warranty"; or "You've Got Warranty\$". The consumer can, via an interactive Internet site (e.g. of the host system, the vendor, other systems, and/or the manufacturer) provide the sales and product information to activate the warranty. Similarly, by phone, fax, email, and/or interactive Internet site, a consumer can be alerted to possible warranty extensions and/or renewals and can apply for them.

What follows are some of, but not all, the objects of this invention. In addition to the specific objects stated below for at least certain preferred embodiments of the invention, other objects and purposes will be readily apparent to one of skill in this art who has the benefit of this invention's teachings and disclosures. It is, therefore, an object of at least certain preferred embodiments of the present invention to provide:

New, useful, unique, efficient, nonobvious systems and methods for providing direct electronic consumer/vendor contact for business transactions via a system such as the Internet global communications system;

New, useful, unique, efficient, nonobvious systems and methods

for providing to a consumer guaranteed best pricing for a present sale and/or for a preset future time period;

Such business methods and/or coupon methods which include defining a particular geographic area of interest to a consumer;

5 Such methods which make refunds, etc., available to consumers even if they are unaware of them;

Such methods which a consumer can avail him or herself of via a host system and/or via an Internet network; and

10 Such methods and systems which automatically apply a refund to a system user's account.

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Certain embodiments of this invention are not limited to any particular individual feature disclosed here, but include combinations of them distinguished from the prior art in their structures and functions. Features of the invention have been broadly described so that the detailed descriptions that follow may be better understood, and in order that the contributions of this invention to the arts may be better appreciated. There are, of course, additional aspects of the invention described below and which may be included in the subject matter of the claims to this invention. Those skilled in the art who have the benefit of this invention, its teachings, and suggestions will appreciate that the conceptions of this disclosure may be used as a creative basis for designing other structures, methods and systems for carrying out and practicing the present invention. The claims of this invention are to be read to include any legally equivalent devices or methods which do not depart from the spirit and scope of the present invention.

The present invention recognizes and addresses the previously-mentioned problems and long-felt needs and provides a solution to those problems and a satisfactory meeting of those needs in its various possible embodiments and equivalents thereof. To one skilled in this art who has the benefits of this invention's realizations, teachings, disclosures, and suggestions, other purposes and advantages will be appreciated from the following

description of preferred embodiments, given for the purpose of disclosure, when taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings. The detail in these descriptions is not intended to thwart this patent's object to claim this invention no matter how
5 others may later disguise it by variations in form or additions of further improvements.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

10 A more particular description of embodiments of the invention briefly summarized above may be had by references to the embodiments which are shown in the drawings which form a part of this specification. These drawings illustrate certain preferred embodiments and are not to be used to improperly limit the scope of the invention which may have other equally effective or legally equivalent embodiments.

Fig. 1 is a schematic view of a system according to the present invention.

Fig. 2 is a schematic view of a personal computer useful with a system according to the present invention.

DESCRIPTION OF EMBODIMENTS PREFERRED AT THE TIME OF FILING FOR THIS PATENT

25 The present invention, in certain preferred embodiments, provides a method for guaranteeing a consumer a best price on an item (or for a service) purchased from a vendor (either over a computer network or host system or at a vendor location) in a first transaction at a first price, the method including recording the
30 first price (on paper or on a computer system or computer memory) and information identifying the consumer, monitoring the sales price of the item for a predetermined time period after the first transaction, noting any price lower than the first price for the item during the predetermined time period, calculating (either

manually, by calculator, and/or by computer) a money-value difference between the first price and said any price lower than the first price, and refunding (in cash in hand paid; by crediting a consumer's account; by providing coupons or certificates; and/or
5 by making the amount available to the consumer either on-line or at a vendor location) to the consumer an amount equal to the money-value difference. The method can be done manually with paper records; on a suitably programmed computer and/or computer system or network; and/or via a host system or any other system, e.g. but
10 not limited to as described in the "Business System" patent application or in any prior art system discussed therein.

In certain aspects, the guaranteed pricing is in effect for only one or two price changes. In other aspects, the guaranteed pricing is in effect throughout the entire preset time period and all lower prices will be applied. The "any price lower than the first price" can be limited to any lower price offered by the particular vendor involved in the first transaction and/or can be limited to a lower price that becomes available in a pertinent geographic area. Alternatively, the "any lower price" can be based
20 on a preset group of vendors including competitors of the vendor involved in the first transaction, or all suppliers of the item (or service), e.g. but not limited to city-wide, state-wide, country-wide, or world-wide.

In certain aspects, methods as described above can include
25 alerting a consumer regarding a refund based on a new lower price. Consumers can be alerted, e.g. by phone, fax, email, and/or via an interactive Internet site, e.g. but not limited to with a host system or other system (e.g. or in the "Business System" patent application and in any prior art system disclosed therein).
30 Methods according to the present invention can also take into account new incentives to buy the item that was the subject of the first transaction (e.g. frequent flyer miles, discounts on other items or services, rebates, coupons for the same or other items or services in the future, cheaper or free warranties or extended

warranties, etc.). A money-value is assigned to the new incentive and this is made available to the consumer and/or, if possible, the actual new incentive itself. The refunds, etc. and/or new incentives can be made available and/or paid for by a vendor, a
5 host system or other similar system, a manufacturer, and/or a third party administrator of a host system.

The present invention, therefore, discloses in some, but not necessarily all embodiments, a business system for guaranteeing a consumer a best price on an item purchased from a vendor in a first
10 transaction at a first price, the system as shown in Fig. 1 including means for recording the first price and information identifying the consumer, means for monitoring the sales price of the item for a predetermined time period after the first transaction, means for noting any price lower than the first price
15 for the item during the predetermined time period, means for calculating a money-value difference between the first price and said any price lower than the first price, and means for refunding to the consumer an amount equal to the money-value difference; and, optionally, a host system that includes the means for recording,
20 means for monitoring, means for noting, and means for calculating; means for duplicating for the consumer any incentive accompanying sales of the item after the first transaction during the predetermined time period; means for determining a pertinent geographic area for the first transaction and for limiting the
25 monitoring step to sales prices available within the pertinent geographic area; and/or means for providing a warranty to the consumer.

The present invention, therefore, discloses in some, but not necessarily all embodiments, a business system with a magnetic
30 strip card with consumer identifying information encoded thereon said information identifying a consumer desiring to conduct a transaction with a vendor, a host system that maintains information about discounts from said vendor, an apparatus for reading information on the magnetic strip card, said apparatus

interconnected with and in communication with the host system, and means for applying any applicable discount related to said transaction for the benefit of said consumer, improvements as shown in Fig. 2 including means for guaranteeing a consumer a best price on an item purchased from the vendor in a first transaction at a first price, said means further including means for recording the first price and information identifying the consumer, means for monitoring the sales price of the item for a predetermined time period after the first transaction, means for noting any price lower than the first price for the item during the predetermined time period, means for calculating a money-value difference between the first price and said any price lower than the first price, and means for refunding to the consumer an amount equal to the money-value difference.

The present invention therefore, in certain embodiments, provides improvements for a method for generating vendor information including contacting a host system by a consumer, identifying a pertinent geographic area of interest to the consumer, identifying at least one vendor doing business in the pertinent geographic area, retrieving from the host system information related to the at least one vendor, and displaying said information for the consumer; and in one aspect such a method includes automatically displaying and/or downloading to a computer the information to the consumer — the improvements including providing a method to guarantee to the consumer a better price or a best price on items or services purchased from the vendor for a predetermined time period following a transaction.

The present invention therefore, in certain embodiments, provides improvements for a method for a vendor to provide a future discount to a customer of the vendor, the method including noting a transaction amount indicative of value of a transaction between the customer and the vendor, based on the transaction amount, calculating a discount amount to be applied to a future transaction

between the customer and the vendor, storing the discount amount for future use, and informing the customer of the discount amount; and such a method including applying the discount amount to a future transaction of the customer — the improvements including providing a method to guarantee to the consumer a better price or a best price on items or services purchased from the vendor for a predetermined time period following a transaction.

The present invention therefore, in certain embodiments, provides improvements for a method for making a contribution to a retirement account of a customer of a vendor, the method including noting a transaction amount indicative of value of a transaction between the customer and the vendor, based on the transaction amount, calculating a contribution amount to be made to a retirement account of the customer, and making a contribution to the customer's retirement account in the amount of the contribution amount; and such a method wherein the vendor, the customer, a third party administrator and/or a host system make the contribution to the retirement account — the improvements including providing a method to guarantee to the consumer a better price or a best price on items or services purchased from the vendor for a predetermined time period following a transaction.

The present invention therefore, in certain embodiments, provides improvements for a method for generating a coupon including contacting a host system by a consumer, identifying a pertinent geographic area of interest to the consumer, identifying at least one vendor doing business in the pertinent geographic area, retrieving from the host system information related to the at least one vendor and at least one coupon currently provided by the at least one vendor, and generating a coupon corresponding to the at least one coupon — the improvements including providing a method to guarantee to the consumer a better price or a best price on items or services purchased from the vendor for a predetermined time period following a transaction.

The present invention discloses, in at least some if not all embodiments, improvements for a business system with a magnetic strip card with consumer identifying information encoded thereon said information identifying a consumer desiring to conduct a transaction with a vendor, a host system that maintains information about discounts from said vendor, an apparatus for reading information on the magnetic strip card, said apparatus interconnected with and in communication with the host system, and means for applying any applicable discount (coupon, rebate, sales price, volume discount, reward, etc.) related to said transaction for the benefit of said consumer — the improvements including providing a method to guarantee to the consumer a better price or a best price on items or services purchased from the vendor for a predetermined time period following a transaction.. Such a system may have one, some, or all of the following in any combination: wherein the apparatus for reading the information is located at a location of the vendor; wherein the apparatus for reading the information is located at a location of the consumer; a computer at the location of the consumer for the consumer to communicate with the host system; means for automatically downloading information to the computer without a request from the consumer; means at the host system for receiving from the vendor transaction information about said transaction, and means at the host system for storing said transaction information; means for calculating a future discount for the consumer based on the transaction information; means for providing the consumer with information about the future discount; means for calculating an amount of a retirement account contribution for a consumer based on the transaction information; means for making a contribution to a retirement account of the consumer based on the calculated amount (e.g. but not limited to a contribution made by a third party administrator, by the vendor, by the host system, or by the consumer); means for providing the consumer with a physical coupon for use in a transaction with the

5 vendor; means for determining a pertinent geographic area for the
consumer (e.g. but not limited to, based on phone number, zip code,
and/or information inputted by a consumer); means for displaying
for the consumer information about the vendor for the determined
pertinent geographic area (which may be reduced or enlarged in
scope by the consumer); means for displaying for the consumer
information about a desired product or service available in the
pertinent geographic area; means for automatically determining the
pertinent geographic area based on information about a consumer,
10 e.g. but not limited to a phone number used by the consumer to
contact the host system; wherein the information about the consumer
includes a phone number used by the consumer to contact the host
system and/or a zip code of the consumer' location; wherein the
consumer uses the Internet global communications system or some
15 other similar communications network to contact the host system;
and/or means for automatically downloading to the computer
information about a vendor without a request from the consumer.

20 In conclusion, therefore, it is seen that the present
invention and the embodiments disclosed herein and those covered by
the appended claims are well adapted to carry out the objectives
and obtain the ends set forth. Certain changes can be made in the
subject matter without departing from the spirit and the scope of
this invention. It is realized that changes are possible within
the scope of this invention and it is further intended that each
25 element or step recited in any of the following claims is to be
understood as referring to all equivalent elements or steps. The
following claims are intended to cover the invention as broadly as
legally possible in whatever form it may be utilized. The
invention claimed herein is new and novel in accordance with 35
30 U.S.C. § 102 and satisfies the conditions for patentability in §
102. The invention claimed herein is not obvious in accordance
with 35 U.S.C. § 103 and satisfies the conditions for patentability
in § 103. This specification and the claims that follow are in
accordance with all of the requirements of 35 U.S.C. § 112. The

inventors may rely on the Doctrine of Equivalents to determine and assess the scope of their invention and of the claims that follow as they may pertain to apparatus not materially departing from, but outside of, the literal scope of the invention as set forth in the following claims.

What is claimed is:

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